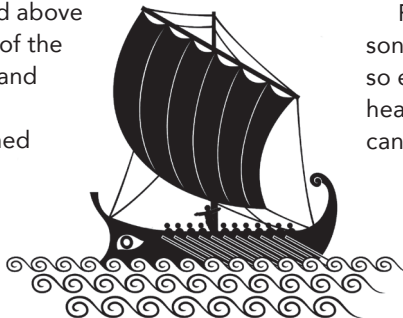


Misdirected Hope

FR. THOMAS M. SANTA, CSSR

In Greek mythology one of the most compelling stories is about Odysseus, who desires to return to his home after the Trojan War. The journey requires that Odysseus' ship sail past the shore where live the sirens, mythical creatures whose music and singing is intoxicating and also deadly. Warned of the powers of the sirens and advised by the sorceress Circe, Odysseus ordered the sailors to plug their ears with wax so they wouldn't be able to hear anything. Odysseus did not plug his ears but tied himself to the ship's mast, telling the crew not to untie him, even if he begged.

As the ship passed through the sirens' territory, Odysseus begged to be untied, but the sailors ignored him. The siren song was as promised: intoxicating, powerful, and enticing. Tied to the mast of the ship, Odysseus could easily see the skeletal remains of sailors who had succumbed to the song of the sirens and whose bones littered the shore. Despite witnessing the evidence of death and destruction, Odysseus desired above all to believe the false assurances of the song. The siren song was alluring and filled with joy and promise, but it led to nothing but death. He listened and struggled to break free but was unable to do so despite his best efforts. Because he was bound so firmly, he survived the encounter, but barely.



I was thinking of this mythological story as perhaps illustrative of the false promises, the siren song, that is often heard by those who suffer with the scrupulous disorder. There are many "siren" voices, pundits on social media but unfortunately also in both the confessional and pulpit, who do not understand scrupulosity and make false promises to the person who is suffering. The promises are intoxicating, powerful, and enticing:

"If only you would engage in a more disciplined spiritual practice."

"If only you would perfect your prayers."

"If only you would frequent the sacrament of reconciliation and piously confess all of your sins."

In truth, each assurance and promise—many more than I have room for here—are each best understood as *misdirections*. They are not helpful, and although shared with enthusiasm and even conviction, they do not effectively manage the scrupulous disorder but only make it worse.

Perhaps the most harmful "siren song" is the one that those who suffer so easily believe. It cuts right to the heart of the only way scrupulosity can be managed. According to the "song," if you engage in the steps of addressing your scrupulous condition effectively by mitigating the spiritual practices and

disciplines that trigger for the disorder, you will betray the Catholic tradition and fall further into sin and guilt. Any priest or confessor who counsels this risky and unsubstantiated approach does not fully appreciate the Catholic tradition.

As hard as it might be to accept, I know that those who counsel using this approach are doing harm. By contrast, I often have been labeled as misinformed and unfaithful because of my pastoral counseling, despite having devoted more than thirty-five years to this ministry; despite the numerous imprimaturs I have received for what I have written; despite the testimony of the Catholic moral tradition itself. Despite all of this, critics say, I somehow do not know what I am talking about.

I understand the criticism and its appeal. It is tempting to ignore good, solid, orthodox, and pastoral Catholic direction because there is an element of risk to engage it. It does not seem as safe as the promise of clarity and surety of which the “sirens” sing in their song. Pastoral direction seems risky because you need to break away from the practices and disciplines that are not helpful, even when these same elements are essential to what it means to be Catholic for a person who does not suffer with the scrupulous disorder. Therein lies the uncomfortable truth. What works for a person who does not have scrupulosity is often the same practice and discipline that triggers the disorder for a person who is scrupulous. It is not the practice or the discipline that is flawed. It is rather the power of the disorder to misinterpret, misdirect, and make useless certain elements in the tradition.

For example, the entire lexicon of sin, mortal and venial, has been well-thought-out and tested through the years. It represents the best critical and theological thinking of many of the saints and the teaching tradition of the Church. However, the lexicon—with all its definitions, nuances, and

practical applications for discernment—is useless for people with scrupulosity. They suffer from a diminished capacity to make a free choice. Their default position is always mortal and serious. The disorder interprets each decision and choice as seriously lacking in any kind of moral goodness and judges it as incomplete, against God, and demanding some sort of punishment, restitution, perfect sorrow, or multiple confessions of sin in response to the anxiety.

For people who do not suffer with scrupulosity, the thought that every action, choice, and decision is somehow mortal in nature and that there is no other possibility

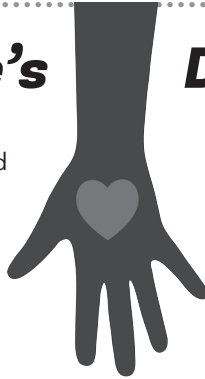
is incomprehensible. That’s because a person without scrupulosity does not suffer with the diminished capacity that scrupulosity generates. For scrupulous people, it is incomprehensible that something could be defined as nonserious or lacking in the fundamental conditions required for sin, when it is so obvious, or at least it feels so obvious, that there is something terribly wrong.

There are no shortcuts to healing and managing the scrupulous condition. You cannot think your way out of scrupulosity. You cannot practice your way out of scrupulosity. You cannot confess your way out of scrupulosity. There are always more questions than there are answers. The only way to manage the disorder is to radically reorient your personal understanding away from hypersensitive responsibility and orient to the possibility of human weakness as not displeasing God. This is risky because growing in truth, vulnerability, and eventually relationship and intimacy is always scary. Every person in a relationship will testify to the truth of this assertion. I hope every person in a relationship will refuse to hear the siren song of misinformation and embrace the path that leads to life, not the road that leads to the skeletons of the misinformed that litter the shore of the sea. ☸

***To manage the disorder,
move from hypersensitive
responsibility and orient to the
possibility of human weakness
as not displeasing God.***

Happy Valentine's

Day to Me!



Think of yourself at the moment God created you. Imagine yourself in Genesis when God created the world and everything he created was good. You're part of God's creation. You were part of his plan. You're in his plan.

God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.God looked at everything he had made, and found it very good (Genesis 1:27, 31).

What a statement! God Almighty created us in his image and he found it good, he was pleased with it. When we think about that passage, why do so many of us disagree with the amazing message? We put ourselves down, seeing more wrong in ourselves than right.

Throughout any given day, even this day, the things we do right tend to blend into the woodwork. We focus on what we did wrong. We beat ourselves up, and somehow in the process we convince ourselves God is disappointed in us. We see ourselves through our own filter—not God's. While we think he sees us through a dark glass and condemnation, he sees us only through the eyes of love.

Remember how unique each of us is. God threw away the mold when he created us. There is something unique about you that you bring to each day. Your uniqueness can affect the people around you in a positive way, and in essence, your journey to salvation. The key to experiencing that is to picture yourself as God sees you.

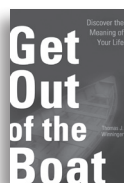
What aspects of us did he create that in turn signify the purpose in our lives? What talents and skills do we have? In short, how can each of us gain clarity about our uniqueness in God's eyes?

God understands we're human and that to be human is to fail. When we realize our gifts and understand their infinite value, we'll first and always recognize that, amid failure, we must challenge ourselves to stand up.

We must understand we can do nothing to earn God's love. God loves us for who we are, not what we do. It's not our success as human beings that satisfies God. It's contributing those gifts to activities, drawing God's glory into the experiences of everyday life.

The challenge for all of us is to see ourselves as servants in God's eyes, as partners in God's creation, rather than spending so much time focusing on what we do right or wrong. We need to focus on how we contribute our gifts in a communal way in order to exemplify the recognition of God's glory in the lives of people around us.

O, Lord, please help me today to understand that I was created in your image and likeness. You infused talents and skills in me that draw me to serve you. The joy I bring to others through the skills and talents you give me are the tribute I give to you for being created. Come into my heart and mind today and clear away the desire of the things in this world that misdirect my efforts away from you and onto personal gratification. Thank you for this time together. Amen. ✨



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Q. *I know that I have committed hundreds of mortal sins since my last confession. There is no way that I can be assured that I can remember all of them in order to confess them.*

A. You did not commit hundreds of mortal sins since your last confession. Mortal sin is best understood as a description of the condition of your relationship with God as a result of freely chosen actions. Mortal sin means “death.” There is only one death, not hundreds of deaths piling up on each other. That idea of number and kind, which is the only way you can have hundreds of mortal sins, was dependent on the assignment of penalties to canonical laws. It is not reflective of current theology or understanding.

Q. *If you suffer from scrupulosity, does that automatically indicate that you also have obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)? It seems as if the descriptions are used interchangeably, which I find confusing.*

A. No. You can be scrupulous and have “a tender conscience,” which can be remedied by proper catechetical formation. OCD, on the other hand, employs the language of sin and religious understanding as a way to describe the interpretation of specific compulsive behaviors and ritualistic responses. It is a mental disorder and cannot be effectively addressed through catechetical formation. Therapy and good spiritual direction are essential in order to manage religious OCD/scrupulosity.



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